Chapter 7
American Political Ideologies and Beliefs

CONCEPTS

- What is public opinion?
- What is the public agenda, and how is the agenda shaped?
- How is public opinion measured?
- What role does the media play in shaping public opinion?
- What effect does the media have on individual political beliefs and voting behavior?

Public opinion, simply put, is how people feel about things. Pollsters measure the public's opinion of everything from television programs to commercial products to political issues. Networks, companies, and politicians commission these polls because they seek the approval of the public.

Obviously, public opinion is not uniform. Even the most popular television shows attract a minority of all Americans. Furthermore, many programs are designed to receive favorable ratings from a specific subgroup of society rather than from the public at large. Networks, for example, seek high ratings from young, middle-class audiences, as these are the audiences most sought after by advertisers. Because advertisers are less interested in senior citizens, networks seek their approval less aggressively.

The same holds true for political issues. Most Americans—the **general public**—care more about the political issues that affect their day-to-day lives directly. A political issue does not have to interest the majority of Americans, then, to be considered important by politicians. If an issue is of enough importance to a smaller group—the **issue public**—to cause those voters to become more politically active, that issue may well become an important political issue. Furthermore, very few politicians seek the approval of the general public as a whole. With the exception of the president, all politicians have much smaller constituencies, and they measure the public opinion of these constituencies in order to appeal to them. Members of the House of Representatives, for example, are interested primarily in the concerns of their home districts, which are often quite different from the concerns of the general public.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PUBLIC OPINION

Those who measure public opinion are not just interested in the direction of public opinion—that is, how the public is feeling at a given moment. They also want to know how strongly the public feels and how likely people are to change their minds. That is why they try to gauge the following characteristics of public opinion:

- **Saliency.** The saliency of an issue is the degree to which it is important to a particular individual or group. For example, Social Security is an issue with high salience for senior citizens. Among young voters, Social Security has a much lower salience.

- **Intensity.** How strongly do people feel about a particular issue? When the intensity of a group's opinion is high, that group can wield political influence far beyond their numbers.

- **Stability.** Public opinion on issues changes over time. Some dimensions of public opinion, such as support for democracy and a controlled free-market economy, remain relatively stable. Others, like presidential approval ratings, can change quickly, as was the case during the last two years of George H. W. Bush's administration. During the Gulf War (January 1991), President Bush recorded the highest approval ratings of any president since 1945. Less than two years later, the majority of Americans showed their disapproval of his performance as president by voting against him.

In the United States, public opinion is measured regularly through elections. Elections measure public opinion indirectly, however, because votes for—or against—candidates can rarely be translated into clear and specific opinions. Referenda measure the public's opinion on specific issues (a **referendum** submits to popular vote to accept or reject a measure passed by a legislative body). Public opinion is measured most frequently and directly by **public opinion polls.**

POLLS MEASURE PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion polls are designed to determine public opinion by asking questions of a much smaller group. Pollsters achieve this through **random sampling**, a method that allows them to poll a representative cross section of the public. When polling by phone, pollsters use a computer that dials numbers randomly. When conducting **exit polls** at polling places on election day, they target voting districts that collectively represent the voting public and randomly poll voters who are leaving the voting place. This method discourages bias, which may occur if pollsters were to approach only those voters who seemed most friendly or eager to participate.

Polling Accuracy

When performed correctly, polls can measure the opinions of 300 million Americans—within about a 5% margin of error—by polling a mere 1,500 of them.

For a poll to accurately reflect public opinion, its questions must be carefully worded. A poll that asks, "Do you approve or disapprove of the death penalty?" would likely yield a very different response from one that asks, "Would you want the death penalty imposed on someone who killed your parents?" Most pollsters try to phrase questions objectively. Polls generally ask multiple-choice questions, which are closed-ended, as opposed to open-ended questions (such as, "Explain why you approve or disapprove of the death penalty"). Closed-ended questions yield results that are more easily quantifiable, providing a more accurate read of the direction and intensity of public opinion.

Even with those controls, polls cannot be 100% accurate. Polling organizations know how accurate their polls are and include this information with the poll results. The accuracy is measured as a sampling error and appears as a percentage with a plus and minus sign to the left (for example, ±4%). The **sampling error** tells how far off the poll results may be. Suppose a poll indicated that 60% of Americans favored the death penalty. If that poll had a sampling error of ±4%, the actual percentage of Americans favoring the death penalty could be anywhere between 56% and 64%. Generally, the more respondents a poll surveys, the lower the sampling error.

The best-known poll is the Gallup poll. Many major newspapers and television networks conduct public opinion polls, as do academic and public interest institutions.

WHERE DOES PUBLIC OPINION COME FROM?

Public opinion is made up of the views of individuals, who develop their political attitudes through a process called **political socialization.** Why, and when, do they change? What factors influence a person's political beliefs?

Despite what you may have heard, people do not become more conservative or liberal as they age. The political beliefs that people possess by early adulthood typically do not change much over the course of their lives.

The first factor that influences individual political beliefs is **family.** Most people eventually affiliate with the same political party as their parents. Children's political beliefs are also greatly affected by the moral and ethical values they learn from their parents. Also important is their **location**—people born in rural states may develop political views that are more socially conservative than those of city dwellers.

As children grow, other factors influence their political socialization. In **school,** they learn about history and government and are exposed to the political perspectives of teachers and peers. **Religious institutions** have a similar influence on many Americans. **Mass media** such as television, radio, magazines, and the Web further inform political attitudes. In general, however, youth is a time when many Americans pay relatively little attention to and have little interest in political issues. This is because most political issues have little direct impact on their day-to-day lives.

Those who progress to **higher education** often find themselves questioning their social and political assumptions for the first time. As a result, college can be a time of radical change in an individual's political beliefs. Studies have shown that students retain many of the political attitudes they acquire in college throughout their lives.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

The terms *liberal* and *conservative* on the previous page refer to the predominant ideologies in the United States. An **ideology** is a coherent set of thoughts and beliefs about politics and government.

The three most common political ideologies in the United States are the following:

- **Conservative.** Conservatives stress that individuals should be responsible for their own well-being and should not rely on government assistance. As a result, they tend to oppose government interference in the private sector. They also oppose most federal regulations, preferring that the market determine costs and acceptable business practices (laissez-faire economics). Social conservatives, who make up a powerful wing of the conservative population, do support government action on social issues. In a 2019 Gallup poll, 35% of Americans considered themselves to be conservatives.
- **Liberal.** Liberals believe that the government should be used in a limited way to remedy the social and economic injustices of the marketplace. They tend to support government regulation of the economy. They also support government efforts to redress past social injustices through programs such as affirmative action. Most liberals believe the government should strictly enforce the separation of church and state, and therefore oppose school-sponsored prayer and proposed bans on abortions, which they perceive as motivated by religious beliefs. In a 2019 Gallup poll, 26% of Americans considered themselves to be liberal.
- **Moderate (or Independent).** The beliefs of moderates do not constitute a coherent ideology. Instead, moderates view themselves as pragmatists who apply common sense rather than philosophical principles to political problems. Moderates once made up the largest part of the American public, but with the financial crisis of 2008–2009, polls have shown a small decline in this number. Indeed, a 2019 Gallup poll found that 34% of Americans considered themselves to be moderate.

Compared with citizens of other Western democracies, Americans have fewer main ideological groups. The many extreme political parties that exist in Europe, ranging from right-wing nationalists to left-leaning communists, are practically nonexistent in the United States. Furthermore, perhaps because of the paucity of viable groups, Americans readily vote outside of their self-professed political beliefs. In 2008, for example, 20% of self-identified conservative voters chose the more liberal Barack Obama over conservative Republican candidate John McCain due to the economic crisis and negative perception of Republican incumbent George W. Bush.

Americans who are strongly ideological tend to be the most politically active citizens. They are more likely than other Americans to join political organizations and participate in political activities, such as rallies and boycotts. One result of this phenomenon is that candidates in the presidential primaries must perform a balancing act. To win the primaries, they must first appeal to the more ideological party members. Then in the general elections, candidates must move back to the political center or risk alienating the general voting public.

See the next chapter for a more detailed explanation of political beliefs by party.

Determining Factors in Ideological and Political Behavior

Although there is no one-to-one correlation between people's backgrounds and their political beliefs, people who share certain traits tend to share political beliefs. Here are some of the factors that influence people's ideological and political attitudes.

- **Race/ethnicity.** Racial and ethnic groups who disproportionately populate the lower income levels tend to be more liberal than other Americans. Blacks and Hispanics have been more likely than other Americans to support liberal social programs, for example. There are exceptions to these rules, however: Cuban Americans, for one, have tended to be conservative.

- **Religion.** Among the various religious groups in the United States, Jews and African American Protestants are generally the most liberal. Catholics also lean toward the political left, although many are conservative on social issues. Devout white Protestants tend to be more conservative. This is particularly true in the South, where white Protestants who attend church regularly are among the nation's strongest supporters of the Republican Party.

- **Gender.** Women tend to be more liberal than men. They are more likely to vote Democratic, more likely to support government social welfare programs, and less likely to support increases in military spending.

- **Income level.** Americans in higher income brackets tend to be more supportive of liberal goals such as racial and sexual equality. They also support greater international cooperation. However, they tend to be more fiscally conservative. Poorer Americans, conversely, are generally more conservative on all issues except those concerning social welfare.

- **Region.** Regional differences arise from different economic and social interests. The ethnic and racial mix of the East Coast has made it the most liberal region of the country (making these "blue states"). In the more religious South, conservatism is predominant (making these "red states"). The West Coast, toward which many Americans continue to migrate, is the most polarized, with strong liberal and conservative contingencies scattered up and down the coast; however, this region has leaned more to the left in recent years. Liberals tend to congregate in cities; elsewhere, small town and more rural voters are generally conservative.

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE MASS MEDIA

The **news media** play an important role in the development of public opinion. News media include all of the following:

- news broadcasts on television (particularly 24-hour cable news networks), radio, and the Internet
- newspapers
- news magazines, such as *Time*
- magazine broadcast programs, such as *60 Minutes* and *20/20*
- newsmaker interview programs, such as *Meet the Press* and *The Daily Show* (which may be a comedy show, but has hosted many political guests and approached interviewing those guests seriously)
- political talk radio and podcasts
- websites, blogs, news aggregators, and online forums, such as *The Huffington Post, Drudge Report,* and *Politico*
- social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit

These media provide most Americans with their most extensive exposure to politicians and the government. In many ways, they act as an intermediary between the people and the government, constantly questioning the motives and purposes of government actions and then reporting their findings to the public.

Throughout American history, public exposure to news media has consistently increased, both through higher literacy rates and through the expansion of news sources available in print, broadcast, and online. As a result, the media have played an increasingly significant role over the years in shaping public opinion.

The Media and the Public Agenda

The most important role the media play is in setting the **public agenda.** By deciding which news stories to cover and which to ignore, and by returning to some stories night after night while allowing others to die after a few reports, the news media play an important part in determining the relative importance of political issues. This power of the media is limited by the public's inherent interest in a story, however. Prior to American involvement in Bosnia, constant coverage of the crisis there did little to raise public awareness of or interest in the story, because many Americans perceived the crisis as too remote to be of interest. In general, the process of setting the national agenda is a dynamic one. The media generally try to report stories that they believe will interest the public, and often there is a domino effect: as interest grows, coverage increases, and the story becomes more important.

Less clear is whether the media have the power to alter public opinion. It is generally believed that the media affect public opinion only when news coverage is extensive and is either predominantly negative or positive. For example, a constant barrage of negative images broadcast from Vietnam in the 1960s is credited with having turned many Americans against the war.

Conservative magazines such as the *National Review* are read almost exclusively by conservatives; liberal magazines, such as *The Nation,* are read primarily by liberals and progressives.

The news media can also alter public opinion when it is volatile: studies have demonstrated, for example, that public approval of the president is quite volatile and changes depending on whether news coverage of the president is positive or negative. In most other instances, however, the media do not greatly impact public opinion. This is in part because the news media cover many stories simultaneously, thus diluting their ability to influence public opinion on any single issue. It is also due in part to the fact that most Americans choose those news media that reinforce their political beliefs.

In addition to the news media, social media have become crucial tools for major grassroots political movements, both within the United States and abroad. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, and other such social media sites can act as both a shaper and an indicator of public opinion, mostly with younger demographics (ages 18–25).

Are the News Media Biased?

Critics from both ends of the political spectrum claim that the news media interject their political beliefs into their reports. It seems that not a day goes by without political pundits accusing Fox of being wildly conservative, and MSNBC of pushing a liberal agenda. Conservatives cite polls that have consistently shown that news reporters are more likely to hold liberal views and vote Democratic than are average Americans. Liberals point out that the major news media are owned by large, conservative companies. They argue that these companies exert pressure on the networks to downplay or ignore stories that reflect badly on the companies or the economic and political forces that support them.

Many studies have shown that there is less ideological bias in news reporting than is claimed by critics, either in the stories news organizations choose to report or in the way they report them. Over the course of American history, the news media have in fact grown markedly less biased. Most newspapers in the 18th and 19th centuries were openly partisan; today, many news organizations attempt to maintain journalistic integrity by remaining as objective as possible.

Commercial concerns reinforce this trend toward objectivity. Biased reporting may appeal strongly to one segment of the population, but it would just as surely alienate another segment. Seeking to offend the fewest possible audience members, most news organizations attempt to weed out bias and represent both sides of every story in their reports.

This does not mean, however, that the news media achieve complete objectivity, which is impossible. News organizations must make hundreds of decisions each day about what to report and how prominently to report it. Many local newspapers, for example, ignore all but the most major international stories, and not because they are not newsworthy but rather because their readers are generally uninterested in such stories. Network news broadcasts shy away from more complex stories, both because of time constraints and out of fear that they may bore viewers and listeners. This statement even applies to 24-hour news networks, which typically replay headlines throughout the day rather than discuss a larger variety of news stories.

The Audience Factor
A primary source of media bias is the media's need for immediate audience appeal.

Time and space constraints also result in bias in news reporting. Time and space concerns affect all news organizations, but they are most acutely felt by television news programs, which report up to 20 stories during their 18 minutes of broadcast time (some half-hour programs feature as many as 12 minutes of advertising!). News broadcasts increasingly use short sound bites to summarize information, with presidential candidates' sound bites decreasing in length from about 40 seconds (in 1968) to about 7.3 seconds today.

Finally, news reports can be biased by the sources that reporters use for their information. Reporters in Washington, D.C., must rely heavily on politicians and government sources for information, for example. The effect of this reliance is complicated. On one hand, reporters try to not offend their government sources with uncomplimentary reports, because they will need to return to those sources for future stories. Furthermore, there is the danger that reporters in Washington will become too close to the people and events they cover, resulting in bias. On the other hand, reporters must maintain their credibility and so must demonstrate their independence. They cannot consistently file favorable reports on the subjects they cover and expect to remain credible to the viewer. Moreover, surveys have demonstrated that reporters are more skeptical about the motives of politicians than average Americans are. This skepticism is reflected in their reporting. This may in part explain why public confidence in the government has decreased as the news media have grown more prominent.

Most modern politicians understand the power of the media and, accordingly, attempt to influence coverage. They stage events that yield appealing photographs (photo ops) and provide voluminous documented information in support of their positions (press releases). They plan appearances on shows with specific audience demographics that they are seeking, such as *The Daily Show* if they are seeking the youth vote. One famous photo op was President George W. Bush's speech aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003. A banner reading "Mission Accomplished" hung behind the president as he spoke, and it caused much controversy, as that was the final day of combat operations in Iraq. Many politicians felt that the banner was irresponsible and misleading, because casualties have continued for many years afterward. Attempts to manipulate media reports have grown more frequent and more sophisticated in recent years. Many politicians have studied the masterful way in which Ronald Reagan—a former actor—handled press coverage and have attempted to copy his successes.

CHAPTER 7 KEY TERMS

Public opinion
General public
Issue public
Saliency
Intensity
Stability
Referendum
Public opinion polls
Random sampling
Exit polls
Sampling error
Political socialization
Family
Location
School
Religious institutions
Mass media
Higher education
Ideology
Conservative
Liberal
Moderate (Independent)
News media
Public agenda

Chapter 7 Drill

See Chapter 9 for answers and explanations.

Questions 1 and 2 refer to the table below:

RELIGION OF ADULTS IN THE UNITED STATES (in thousands)

Year	1990	2001	2008
Total adult population	175,440	207,983	228,182
Christian	151,225	159,514	173,402
Other religions	5,853	7,740	8,796
No religion	14,331	29,481	34,169
Other response	N/A	57	45
No response	4,031	11,246	11,815

1. Which of the following describes a trend in the table above?
   (A) America's adult population declined between 1990 and 2008.
   (B) The number of Americans who follow no religion more than doubled between 1990 and 2008.
   (C) All groups grew between 1990 and 2008.
   (D) The number of American Christians declined between 1990 and 2001.

2. If the trends in the table continue at the same rate, what is the best conclusion that can be drawn about the changing nature of political socialization in America?
   (A) "Other religions" will become a dominant force in political socialization.
   (B) Fewer Americans will experience political socialization in a religious setting.
   (C) Political socialization will become a thing of the past.
   (D) Religion will become Americans' primary method of political socialization.

3. Which of the following is an accurate comparison between moderates and conservatives?

	Conservative	Moderate
(A)	Smallest voting block	Largest voting block
(B)	Back abortion rights	Rarely change their minds on political issues
(C)	Support affirmative action	Always vote the same way
(D)	Oppose government regulation	View themselves as pragmatists

4. Which of the following issues carries the most intensity with the American public?
   (A) Charter schools
   (B) Indian affairs
   (C) NASA's budget
   (D) Social Security

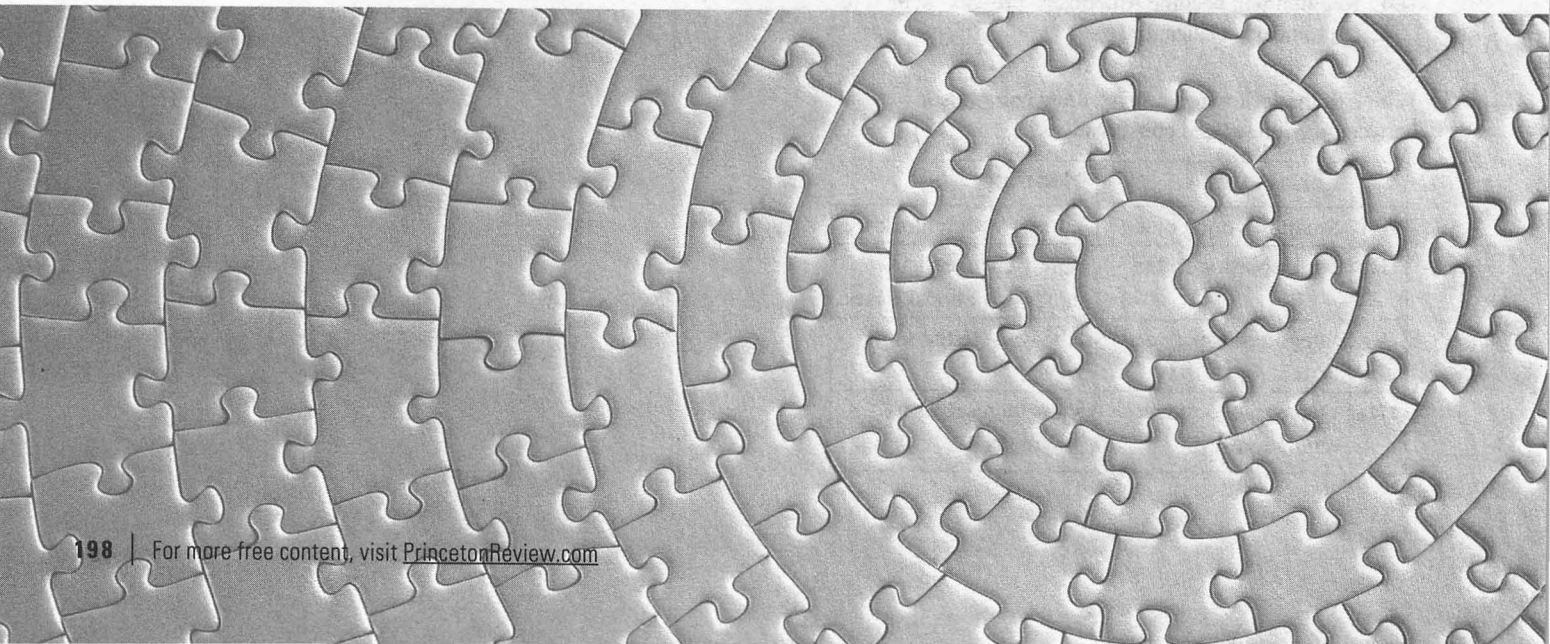
5. Which of the following is generally a factor in determining someone's ideological behavior?
   (A) Birth order
   (B) Gender
   (C) Sport preference
   (D) Age

6. In which of the following ways could a politician most likely generate positive media stories?
   (A) Change positions on a controversial issue
   (B) Appear in photographs with military veterans
   (C) Divorce a spouse with different political views
   (D) Solicit political donations from foreign governments

7. Which of the following is considered to have low stability in U.S. public opinion?
   (A) Presidential approval ratings
   (B) Support for an incumbent U.S. House Representative running unopposed
   (C) Support for Social Security benefits
   (D) U.S. Supreme Court approval ratings

Summary

- Public opinion is measured by looking at saliency, intensity, and stability.
- Data about what people think comes from polls, and many politicians base their decisions on polling data.
- Political socialization is the term used to describe how people learn about politics as they grow and mature.
- There are three basic political ideologies in America: conservative, liberal, and moderate.
- Know which factors tend to lead to which ideologies. For example, a Black woman in Chicago is more likely to be liberal than a white man from the rural South.
- The media plays a major role in the perception of government by placing certain policies and news events in the spotlight. This is also known as creating a public agenda.



REFLECT

Respond to the following questions:

- For which content topics discussed in this chapter do you feel you have achieved sufficient mastery to answer multiple-choice questions correctly?
- For which content topics discussed in this chapter do you feel you have achieved sufficient mastery to discuss effectively in an essay?
- For which content topics discussed in this chapter do you feel you need more work before you can answer multiple-choice questions correctly?
- For which content topics discussed in this chapter do you feel you need more work before you can discuss effectively in an essay?
- What parts of this chapter are you going to re-review?
- Will you seek further help, outside of this book (such as a teacher, tutor, or AP Students), on any of the content in this chapter—and, if so, on what content?